3. Roots

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Chapter 3 – Roots

Definitely his South African roots are firmly planted; that's the foundation of his music – where it's coming from – the black South African experience.\(^5^4\)

Individual expression in music is informed by one’s environment and influences. While Mseleku’s style is clearly influenced by the Afro-American jazz school, his South African roots are what truly define his art. Some of his compositions draw more on this than others, particularly those characterised by the harmonies and melodies associated with the South African jazz style. Mseleku, however, often brings a level of harmonic complexity to the music beyond the traditional space, providing direction for advancement of the style. In tunes like ‘Mbizo’ or ‘Monwabisi’, he can be heard playing rich and thick voicings outside of the basic chord structure and his solos also often explore a flexibility of harmonic language more consistent with the Afro-American jazz school. He is somehow able to use the ‘licence’ of harmonic freedom gained from his other influences without compromising the essence of the style.

While all of Mseleku’s albums have a distinctive South African identity, most are recorded with American rhythm sections. *Home at Last* is the only album that uses South African players entirely. It consists of several more popular-styled South African tunes and provides a valuable opportunity to compare a locally constituted ensemble with the predominantly American ensembles that appear on all his other albums. In addition to *Home at Last*, his solo performance on *Meditations* is also a good example that speaks to his South African identity. Here, he is completely alone and unaffected by influences from ensemble players. This recording reflects on the distinctive conversation between piano, saxophone and voice that likely attracted the attention of the international musical fraternity and earned him recognition as an artist.\(^5^5\)
‘Closer to the Source’ (*Celebration*)

‘Closer to the Source’ is the final track on *Celebration* and was recorded in a different session to the other tracks on the album. The performance includes British saxophonist Courtney Pine as well as South African percussionist Thebe Lipere. The same composition appears on *Meditations* as part of an extended solo performance called ‘Meditation Suite’. On this recording, Mseleku sings and plays the melody and improvises extensively.56

The composition can be divided into two different parts, the first of which is a repeated AAB form with solos and the second a freely improvised section played over the cyclical progression discussed in Chapter 1 (see Fig. 1.1). The first part is divided into a twenty-four bar repeated A section and a nineteen-bar B section constituting the main theme and its bridge. The A section is formulated over a typical I-VI-II-V progression and comprises a repeated eight-bar phrase consisting of a one-bar statement and its refrain. The refrain is extended with some variation to make a further repeated four-bar closing statement (Fig. 3.1).

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**Fig. 3.1**
A section of ‘Closer to the Source’

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The B section (Fig. 3.2) introduces a new melodic idea conceptualised around the resolution of the subdominant minor and subdominant major to the tonic. As III-7 and VI-7 are both tonic related chords, when preceded by bVI and bVII (from the Aeolian mode), the suggestion is the subdominant minor resolving to the tonic, that is, bVII7–I (Bb7-C). bIII (from the Aeolian mode) followed by IV, suggests the subdominant major resolving to the tonic, that is, IV7-I (F7-C) from the blues.

![Fig. 3.2](B section of 'Closer to the Source')

A distinctive piano style emerges in both recordings with the predominant rhythmic sensibility settled in the polyrhythmic relationship of 2 against 3 – the complexity of which is central to the identity of the style. This underpins the rhythmic integrity of the A sections. A feeling of swing is evident in the eighth note groupings with emphasis at times placed on the middle eighth note in the triplet. Swing-eighth notes are notated as regular eighth notes (not as a quarter note followed by an eighth-note pair in a triplet grouping). Where the middle triplet comes into play, the triplet is fully notated (Fig. 3.3).
Fig. 3.3  
‘Meditation Suite’ – rhythm only

Traditional notation can never do proper justice to how the music actually sounds, but does provide a graphic indication of how the rhythm is conceptualised. Fig. 3.4 shows how the left hand divides the bar into two halves in which there is always a note on beat 1 and in the last triplet of beat 2. These two beats are absent in the right hand where more emphasis is placed on 3. The interaction between both hands creates a polyrhythmic quality in which the listener can either hear the rhythm in 2 or 3.

Fig. 3.4  
Piano introduction of ‘Meditation Suite’
A variation on the sequence is heard at the repeat. Here, the bass line in the left hand descends diatonically by step in the second bar (Fig. 3.5).

On the first repeat of the form, Mseleku changes the focus of the melody to an octave higher (Fig. 3.6). In this example, all the triplets are notated.
Other variations engage more of the triplet feel between both hands, at times filling all the triplets in a single bar (see bars 7 and 8 of Fig. 3.7).

**Fig. 3.7**

‘Meditation Suite’ (3:30)

On both versions, the tune repeats the form (AAB) with improvised solos interwoven with the melody, followed by two different shout choruses played over the A sections (Fig. 3.8 and 3.9). These are swapped around on the two recordings.

**Fig. 3.8**

First shout chorus over the A section
Fig. 3.9
Second shout chorus over the A section
'Monwabisi' (Home at Last)

‘Monwabisi’ is a sixty-four-bar form comprising a repeated eight-bar sequence transposed through four keys built off the diminished axis of C-Eb-Gb-A (Fig. 3.10). The sequence is loosely based on the first eight bars of the A section of Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’; however, the style and the harmonies used are more consistent with a popular township jazz

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57 The eight-bar sequence of ‘I Got Rhythm’ has many incarnations but is characterised by several key movements, one of which is the use of V7/IV in bar 5 progressing to IV in bar 6 and moving back to I via IV-7 or #1Vo7.
style. The melody is played in unison with the trumpet and tenor at the octave, with some improvised harmonies at certain points. The bass line remains consistent throughout.

**Fig. 3.10**
Eight-bar repeated sequence and bass line in ‘Monwabisi’

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<td>G7/C</td>
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<td>D7/C7</td>
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The sequence repeats in each key, with the exception of Gb and A (bars 19-26 of the form) where only the first four bars of the sequence are played.

**Fig. 3.11 (a)**
Analysis of ‘Monwabisi’
Mseleku reharmonises the opening bars at times, introducing dominant function resolving to the subdominant and returning back to the tonic via the subdominant minor (Fig. 3.11(b)). This is similar to bars 5-7 of the sequence.

Fig. 3.11 (b)
Opening bars of the solo on ‘Monwabisi’

Deviation from the basic harmonic structure is also seen through his use of implied harmonies and the displacement of the line in his solos. Below, an excerpt from the key change to Eb shows the expected chords against his improvised line. The analysis gives indication of how Mseleku masterfully works around the basic harmonic framework often blurring the points at which the chord changes as well as introducing implied harmonic ideas. In Fig. 3.12, where the chord should change to Ab in the second bar of the form, Mseleku stays with Eb and uses chromatic enclosures to highlight an Eb triad. Inasmuch as he simplifies this opening section, the second part becomes more complex through a mixture of displacement
and implied harmony. V7/IV is anticipated by a bar such that Eb7 is brought into focus on the II-7-V7 (bar 5 of Fig. 3.12). The voicing of Eb7 (Eb7#5b9) in bar 6 is further suspended in the melodic line over the Ab in bar 7. This displacement forces IV-7 to be played on the EbMa7 in bar 8. Two constant-structure units a minor third apart (F-7 followed by Ab-7 and Bb13b9) spell the final resolution in bar 9.

Fig. 3.12
Analysis of an excerpt of Mseleku's solo on ‘Monwabisi’
'Mbizo' (Home at Last)

Like ‘Monwabisi’, ‘Mbizo’ is characterised by the typical I-IV-I-V progression distinctive of the South African jazz style. The first four bars comprise the same fundamental progression and bass line as found in ‘Monwabisi’. Here, the tune is in Db major and consists of two eight-bar melodic phrases (A and B), configured in a thirty-two-bar AABA form. The A section comprises a repeated two-bar phrase with a slight variation at the end and the B section two similar four-bar phrases with minor differences (Fig. 3.13). Like ‘Monwabisi’, the head is played by both the trumpet and saxophone. Solos are shared by the trumpet, saxophone and piano – the trumpet taking the first two A sections, the saxophone the bridge and the piano the last A. The tune has a bluesy quality that is explored by Mseleku in his short solo on the last A of the form.

Fig. 3.13  
Analysis of ‘Mbizo’
'Nants' Inkululeko' (Home at Last)

‘Nants’ Inkululeko’ is formulated on a repeated twelve-bar blues form. The first section (shown as A in Fig. 3.14) is written in a popular township style.

By contrast, the second section of the tune borrows from the alternate chord changes of the blues found in Charlie Parker’s ‘Blues for Alice’. This section comprises two different melodies (shown as letter B and C in Fig. 3.15). The C section is extended by an eight-bar vamp on a Lydian tonic (FMa7#11).
Fig. 3.15
D and C sections of 'Nants' Inkululeko'

IMa7    II-7b5    V7/VI    VI-7    V7/II    II-7    V7/IV

IVMa7    IV-7    III-7    V7/II

II-7    V7    III-7    V7/II    II-7    V7

IMa7    (V7/III)    V7/VI    VI-7    V7/II    II-7    V7/IV

IVMa7    IV-7    III-7    V7/II

II-7    V7    IMa7 (#11)

IMa7 (#11)
‘Home at Last’ (*Home at Last*)

This is the title track of *Home at Last* and probably the most popular-styled tune on the album. It has a typical sixteenth-note backbeat feel and comprises a simple melody entirely derived from the Db major scale (Fig. 3.16).

The tune consists of two four-bar repeated sections (A and B), each with an independent melodic idea in a standard thirty-two-bar AABB form. The A section is based on a typical I-IV-III-VI-II-V progression and the B section moves from V7/IV to II-V7 (Fig. 3.17).
Mseleku explores several variations on the chord structure of the tune both in the head and in his solo. In the introduction and head he implies bIIIo7 (E07) in place of VI-7 in bar 2 of the A sections, and later in the solos introduces V7/V as an indirect resolution to V7 via II-7 in bar 3 (Fig. 3.18).

**Fig. 3.18**
Variations on the first four bars of ‘Home at Last’

Further reharmonisation of the basic chord progression is seen in his solo. Fig. 3.19 shows the opening line ascending on a Db Major scale with an Ab triad outlining F-7 in bar 3. The line stops on a B natural, implying b9 of Bb7 (V7/II). Mseleku introduces Eb7 in bar 4 immediately before the Eb-7. This has a similar function to bIIIo7 and creates an indirect resolution from V7/V to V7 via its related II-7 chord. The added subtleties of the additional harmony give more focus and action to the melodic line outside of the diatonic space suggested by the basic chords.
Fig. 3.19
Mseleku's solo on the A section of 'Home at Last' (written in double time)